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From Longinus to Tolkien: A Theory of the Fantastic Sublime

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FROM LONGINUS TO TOLKIEN

A THEORY OF THE FANTASTIC SUBLIME

by

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Dedication

To my father Bob Wilson,
who taught me
to find magic
in the world
of words.

Acknowledgements

In a phrasebook of English slang, this thesis could easily appear as Exhibit A under the entry for the idiom “it takes a village.” It has been a labor of love, but also one of blood (figuratively speaking), sweat (from walking, out of shape, up the flight of stairs to visit Dr. Catherine Ross, my committee chair), and tears (literally). It’s impossible to know where to start, or whom to thank first, so these are in no particular order.

No words can express the gratitude I feel toward my father, Bob Wilson, without whom none of this would be possible, in many ways. I want to thank Dr. Catherine Ross for her guidance, encouragement, and patience as I stumbled through this process. Thanks likewise to my other committee members Carolyn Tilghman and Ann Beebe, who have deepened my knowledge of literature and theory during my time here at UT Tyler. I’m grateful to Heather, who saw me hit rock bottom in this process and then bounce a few times, for her love and support. My thanks also go to Penny and Michael, who are family and have helped me in ways too numerous to mention. I also couldn’t have done this without numerous coffee sessions with my dear friend Dana, and less frequent but equally enjoyable outings with fellow scholar Jammer. I’m grateful to MorningStar for her keen editorial eye, her writerly camaraderie, and for always asking me “how is your thesis?” Finally, my thanks go out to the wonderful people at East Texas Lighthouse for the Blind, who largely funded this mad venture of mine.

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Abstract

FROM LONGINUS TO TOLKIEN: A THEORY OF THE FANTASTIC SUBLIME

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As concepts, the fantastic and the sublime share much in common. Both have the power to take a reader outside the scope of his or her own worldview and experience, and both share the paradoxical power to both elevate and humble the human spirit. So it is surprising that few scholars have explored the intersection between these two constructs, and none has attempted to systematically explore how this intersection operates in the context of literary theory.

This thesis endeavors to build a theoretical framework for the fantastic sublime by exploring its constituent parts. First, I examine the contribution of the ancient literary critic Longinus, whose basis of the sublime within language informs and infuses the entire concept of the fantastic sublime. Second, I undertake a close reading of J. R. R. Tolkien's essay "On Fairy-Stories" to illustrate how Tolkien's higher-order ideas about fantasy complement Longinus's linguistic building blocks. Finally, I make the case that Romanticism, specifically the work and thought of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, is the ideological glue that binds the fantastic sublime together.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Both the terms "sublime" and "fantasy" are notoriously difficult to define, to the extent that it's tempting to apply to them the definitions often ascribed to art, or obscenity, or pornography: I don't know what it is, but I know it when I see it. Paradoxically, it is this elusive quality, defying simple and easy definition or explanation, that is central to both terms. Just as Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and its variants posit a limitation to the extent to which various properties of particles can be observed, our own knowledge and theory, almost by definition, cannot fully grasp the extent of either the sublime or the fantastic. The following inquiry attempts to fathom what these two diffuse, elusive, yet all-consuming qualities share in common, and how, together, they find expression in works of literature.

There is no intrinsic link between the fantastic and the sublime. Works such as Homer's *The Iliad* are suffused with the sublime, yet although the fantastic makes an occasional appearance it is by no means the epic poem's primary mode of narrative. Similarly, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* is a work of sustained fantasy, but flickers only occasionally with flashes of the transcendent sublime. Still, if one were to make a Venn Diagram of the two terms, "sublime" and "fantastic," one would find a considerable overlap, and it is this space where many great works of literature live which I propose to call the fantastic sublime.

As even a quick search through a library catalogue will reveal, the literature on both these subjects is voluminous. Or, at least, the literature on the sublime is, and the

literature on the fantastic is becoming more so. Where and how, then, should one begin to formulate working critical definitions of both the sublime and the fantastic that, when combined, will prove a useful critical framework in its own right for literary analysis? David M. Sander, in his 1996 study *The Fantastic Sublime: Romanticism and Transcendence in Nineteenth-Century Children's Fantasy Literature*, formulates his conception of the term by relying on a multitude of poets, novelists, and philosophers. For his explication of the sublime, he relies on the work of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, as interpreted by the critic Thomas Weiskel in his psychologically-grounded *The Romantic Sublime*. He thus sees the sublime as a psychological and philosophical breakdown of the relationship between signifier and signified in a subject. For his conception of fantasy Sandner relies on several authors, most notably J. R. R. Tolkien in his landmark essay "On Fairy-Stories."

While I concur with Sandner's decision to foreground Tolkien's work, and with his overall premise that the Romantic era marked a turning point in the development of fantastic literature and the sublime. I take issue with Sandner's work on several points, which will in turn serve as the foundation for my own study. First, as I have mentioned before, though Sandner paints a very vivid and detailed picture of the emergence of the fantastic sublime beginning in the Romantic era and carrying, at least in his study, through the end of the Victorian period and into modernity, he never translates the fantastic sublime into a critical framework. His subsequent criticism of the works of Kenneth Grahame, George MacDonald, and Christina Rosetti, though insightful, therefore lacks cohesion.

Second, and on a related note, I take issue with Sandner's decision to base his conception of the sublime on Thomas Weiskel's study of the Romantic sublime. I, like Sandner, view the Romantic period as of central importance to the development of the fantastic sublime, and hence will subsequently devote considerable space to an exploration of the phenomenon in that period. But no critical work from the period deals with the sublime in a sustained critical manner, not even Coleridge's monumental *Biographia Literaria*, which mentions the sublime only in passing. The result is that Sandner, and Weiskel, must cobble together a definition of the Romantic sublime from a far-flung collection of excerpts from Romantic poetry and prose. I don't mean to discount the validity or value of Weiskel's study of the Romantic sublime as a Zeitgeist of Romantic aesthetics or philosophy. I merely point out that it lacks the formal strength and cohesion to function as a tool for literary criticism. Furthermore, Weiskel and thus Sandner, in locating the sublime within a psychological context, relies overmuch on Freudian constructs, which implicitly fail to engage with the sublime in its own right.

One final criticism of Sandner's study is that it focuses on the importance of the childlike qualities in both the sublime and the fantastic. This may stem from his reliance on Wordsworth and Coleridge in formulating his conception of the sublime. He often returns to Wordsworth's "Intimations Ode," in which we are born "trailing clouds of glory." It may also simply be a matter of focus, for Sandner himself points out the limitation to this approach:

> In other words, the new Romantic view of childhood, despite its celebration of the imagination unbound, had another side, more rigid and disturbing. The cherishing of childhood innocence meant the forsaking of adult understanding. The nineteenth-century literary world of childhood

> was not only simplified, but codified, even stifled, according to the dominant cultural beliefs of what was and what was not appropriate for children. (Sandner, ch. 2)

The fantasy literature of the Victorian era, the very literature that is the focus of Sandner's subsequent study, is plagued by this deficiency. And largely for this reason I will pass over the period in my own study. I will have occasion to explore the theoretical work of Victorian fantasist George MacDonald, but his role is primarily that of facilitator between the thought of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and J. R. R. Tolkien. Like Tolkien, I wish to dissociate fantasy literature as much as possible from the purely childish or childlike. Sandner does, however, hit upon the one place in which the childlike and the fantastic sublime collide: "the desire—the adult desire—not only to return to childhood, but to a divine childhood, that is, to the world of spirit itself" (Sandner, ch. 4). All other associations between fantasy and children, at least in a moralizing or didactic sense, should in my view be eliminated.

While sharing a draft of this work with supervisors for feedback, it was suggested that I attempt in this introduction to establish the scholarly context for Sandner's work. Unfortunately—and this is the larger problem I'm attempting to overcome—is that there isn't a single scholarly conversation or narrative I can cite as context. To be sure, Sandner relies on a wealth of wide-ranging primary and secondary sources. He is particularly indebted to Stephen Pricket's *Victorian Fantasy*, one of the only long-form studies of fantasy literature *per se* in mainstream academia. But so far, works like Prickett's and Sandner's are mere will-o'-the-wisps, glowing brightly and then fading back into darkness, without sparking any sustained scholarly debate or interest. Recent years have

seen a spate of scholarship on Tolkien and other fantasy writers. But the fact that these monographs are published either by lesser-known academic presses or independent commercial presses only proves my point: systematic study of fantasy literature, nor indeed that literature itself, has not yet been deemed worthy of inclusion into the canon. Sandner's own work is a case in point. Though he is a tenured professor at California State University at Fullerton, most of his work has been published by Prager, a small commercial press. It is therefore my hope to construct a theory of fantasy and the fantastic sublime that is robust and versatile enough to warrant the attention of the wider scholarly community.

So what I am proposing is an alternative to Sandner's work on the fantastic sublime. In summary, I hope to construct a definition and framework that are both more grounded in and suitable for literary criticism on a textual basis. For while analyzing a text from a philosophical, psychological, or historical perspective can be immensely fruitful, it also carries with it an inherent danger, a danger that we shall be carried away into the world of history, or the mind, or the spirit, to such an extent that we lose all grounding in the text itself. When reading for pleasure this may not be a danger at all, but indeed may be the desired effect of literature; but when reading for the purpose of criticism, or discussion, or education, this disconnection from the text is perilous indeed.

To accomplish this, I base my discussion of the sublime on Longinus's first-century treatise *Peri hypsous*, literally "On Height" or, perhaps, "On the High Style," but translated since at least the eighteenth century as "On the Sublime." Using an Ancient Greek text as the basis for the criticism of modern fantasy may seem at first an odd

choice, but it is, I think, defensible for several reasons. First, although Longinus's treatise was written in antiquity, it was lost for a millennium and a half, resurfacing only in the Renaissance in the sixteenth century. And it only gained widespread attention after Nicolas Boileau translated it in 1674, only a hundred years or so before the Romantic poets began their most important work. It was Boileau who first rendered *hypsos* as the now-familiar sublime (Doran, Introduction). So in many ways, the sublime is a more modern construct than the antiquity of Longinus's text would suggest.

But why prefer Longinus's treatment of the sublime as a critical framework to that of Edmund Burke or Immanuel Kant, both of whom exerted more direct influence on the early Romantic poets, especially Coleridge? Because, while Burke focused on the sublime in the context of the emerging eighteenth-century discussion of aesthetics more generally, and Kant applied the concept to his philosophy of rationality and morality, Longinus applies the concept of the sublime specifically to literary criticism, and thus his framework is the most relevant to the current discussion. Moreover, as the originator of the concept of the sublime, Longinus's treatise became the template upon which Burke, Kant, and others based their discussions of the sublime as it applied to their own fields of interest. As Robert Doran says of his own recent meticulously-researched inquiry into the early days of the sublime: "this study views Longinus's treatise as having a structuring effect on the modern discourse of sublimity insofar as it sets a basic pattern, which is then revised and developed by later writers, without ever truly escaping the basic Longinian insight (transcendence conceived aesthetically)" (Doran, Introduction). So both because of Longinus's focus on literary criticism and his foundational status in the discourse on

the sublime, it makes sense to use *Peri hypsous*, rather than one of its philosophical predecessors, as scaffolding for the fantastic sublime.

Although I reject a purely Romantic framework for the sublime, I will still have occasion to rely on Romantic writers for expansion and explication of Longinus's thought. William Wordsworth's Preface to the 1802 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, John Keats's letters, and Percy Bysshe Shelley's *A Defense of Poetry* all contain gems of insight into the sublime, and even presage both Tolkien and my own conception of the fantastic sublime. In many ways, these Romantic influences constitute the glue that cements together the disparate elements of the fantastic sublime.

I will, like Sandner, rely heavily on J. R. R. Tolkien's "On Fairy-Stories" as a source for the "fantastic" side of the equation. Whereas Sandner only devotes a few sentences each to Tolkien's ideas of recovery, escape, and consolation as functions of fantasy, however, I intend to unpack these terms at length in the pages that follow.

Strange though it may seem, Longinus and Tolkien actually complement one another in a symbiotic relationship that fuels the very concept of the fantastic sublime. According to Longinus, the sublime draws upon five sources: grandeur of conception, powerful emotion, figures of speech, careful diction, and a grand style. Of these, the first two are intrinsic, while the other three are extrinsic or technical in nature. On grandeur of conception his arguments are, as we shall see, rather circular, and the portion of his treatise devoted to the emotions is missing. So the strength of Longinus lies in his ability to illuminate the "how" of the sublime, rather than the "why" or "to what purpose."

Meanwhile Tolkien sees four main facets to fairy stories, what we would now call fantasy literature: fantasy, recovery, escape, and consolation. Of these, fantasy is the element that most closely resembles the extrinsic or technical elements of Longinus's scheme. On this, Tolkien is rather vague, apart from emphasizing the role of the imagination—something we shall return to. On the other hand, his ideas of recovery, escape, and consolation are much more concrete expressions of the forms that Longinus's "grandeur of conception" might take.

Each element of this taxonomy will be explained in greater detail below. For now, it is enough to observe that Longinus is strong in the areas where Tolkien is weak, and vice versa. The figure below perhaps illustrates this point more clearly.

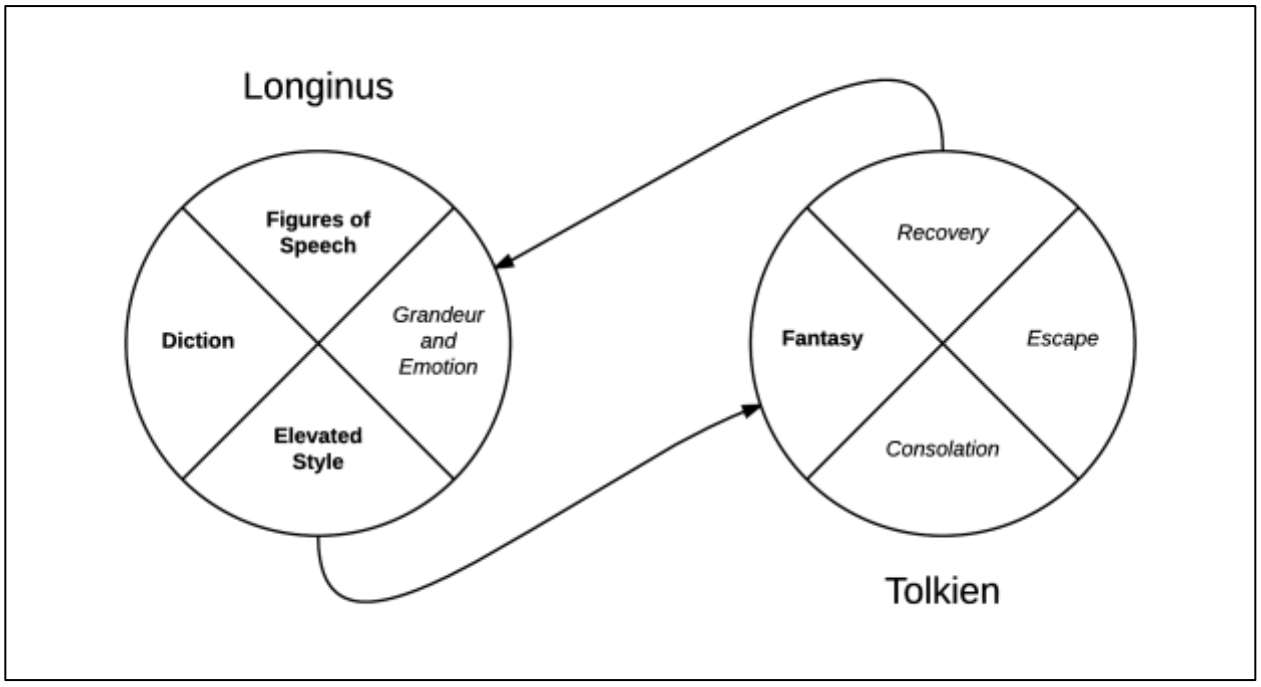

Figure 1. The Symbiosis of Longinus and Tolkien

In the above figure, the bold sections represent the technical or extrinsic aspects of the fantastic sublime, while the regular sections represent its higher-order, intrinsic

qualities. Longinus focuses primarily on the former, while Tolkien gives most of his attention to the latter. In this symbiotic relationship, we can see a complete picture of the fantastic sublime, from intent to execution.

The discussion that follows is in three parts. First, I will elaborate and explicate the foundational components of Longinus's texts, highlighting their importance to the history of the sublime in general, and their contributions to the concept of the fantastic sublime in particular. Longinus was not a fantasist by any stretch of the imagination, but at the morphological and syntactic levels of words and sentences he recognized the importance for imaginative thinking and structuring that lays the groundwork for fantasy writing.

Second, I will examine J. R. R. Tolkien's contribution to the fantastic sublime. If Longinus provides the "how" of the equation, then Tolkien certainly provides the "why." To what end do we tell stories—especially stories about people, places, and ideas that are not real, in the common sense of the word? What is the role of the artist in this storytelling process? Where should fantasy take us? All these questions and more are addressed in Tolkien's lecture "On Faerie-Stories."

The diagram above and this discussion of interlocking components of the fantastic sublime may seem like an oversimplification. (Who has ever found magic in a diagram?) To that end, this work concludes with an exploration of how Romantic thought, especially Coleridge's work on the nature of imagination, suffuses and binds together these disparate components into the organic whole that I call the fantastic sublime. Though there is frustratingly little evidence to suggest that Tolkien studied the Romantics

with any depth or regularity—his academic interests lay in the shadows of the early Middle Ages—he was indirectly influenced by their work through his childhood exposure to writers like William Morris. Moreover, it is inconceivable that Tolkien would have arrived at his conclusions were it not for the ideological frameworks laid down by Romantic poets and thinkers. Although a discussion of Coleridge's influence on Tolkien, especially vis-à-vis George MacDonald, occupies the bulk of this section, credit must on occasion also be given to John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley for their contributions to the fantastic sublime and while this section explores the Romantic contribution to imagination in the fantastic sublime, other relevant Romantic texts appear elsewhere in this monograph, underscoring the significance of the era.

Chapter 2

Longinus and the Sublime

Longinus's treatise on the sublime, *Peri hypsous*, is surprisingly accessible and readable, especially considering that it's 1) a classical text, which even in translation can be a daunting chore to read, and 2) a work of literary criticism, which, as we all know, can often be tiresome affairs. Longinus's style is direct, largely free from the circumlocutions and meandering sentences that plague other Greek and Latin writers. On the whole, his writing is also measured He is certainly free with his opinions of other writers, and these are not always positive, but in general he does not categorically declaim other authors without also finding in them something that is worthy of praise. The only slight exception to this rule is unmitigated scorn of Caecilians of Calacte, with whose own prior treatise on the sublime—now sadly lost—he takes issue at almost every turn. Still, modern scholars could do worse than to emulate his style and tone in their own work.

As mentioned above, Longinus identifies five sources of the sublime in literature. But beneath these five sources there lies as a common foundation: the command of language, without which nothing worthwhile can be done" (Longinus, ch. 8). This is a point of crucial importance to the discussion of the sublime in literature. It is for this reason that I reject frameworks of the sublime developed by Burke or Kant, and even Romantic conceptions of the "natural sublime," for the purpose of my analysis; they are not based on or rooted in language. I do not mean to say that I reject these frameworks of sublimity outright. Thinkers like Burke and Kant have shown persuasively that the

sublime as a mental and emotional construct can be stimulated by a variety of sources beyond written or spoken words. But for literature, language is the immediate vehicle for the sublime, so it seems only appropriate to examine how the sublime works in a linguistic context.

This point is important enough that I feel it deserves a further example to drive it home. When many scholars speak of the sublime in a text, they are usually referring to the subject matter or narrative of the text, rather than its language. And this isn't necessarily wrong. As discussed further below, Christopher Stokes in his book *Coleridge, Language, and the Sublime* argues persuasively that *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is so successful and enduring because it locates Burke's idea of the sublime and terror not outside the audience, but within (Stokes, ch. 5). But these and similar studies fail to recognize, or at any rate don't place any emphasis on, the role of language as the vector, or carrier, for the sublime in literature, fantastic or otherwise. As an experiment, try reading a summary of *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* on Wikipedia, CliffsNotes, or in some other epitomic form. Does the summary have the same aesthetic or emotional impact as the poem itself—even though it contains all the narrative elements that critics point to as sublime? Of course not.

There is another advantage, too, for employing Longinus's linguistic approach to the sublime as a foundation for criticism: it encourages the careful use of close reading. Whatever one's opinions on the philosophical legacy of New Criticism, there's no denying that close reading, as pioneered by I. A. Richards and his student William Empson and practiced by the New Critics, has become the Swiss Army Knife of almost

any literary critic's toolbox. But the technique is particularly useful in examining the linguistic, literary, and rhetorical building blocks of the sublime, as shall become more apparent in the discussion of Longinus's extrinsic or technical sources of the sublime.

Though this section is devoted to Longinus, it is worth digressing briefly to note that Tolkien too (unsurprisingly for a philologist) places a high value on the importance of language:

> The incarnate mind, the tongue [language], and the tale are in our world coeval. The human mind, endowed with the powers of generalization and abstraction, sees not only green-grass, discriminating it from other things (and finding it fair to look upon), but sees that it is green as well as being grass. But how powerful, how stimulating to the very faculty that produced it, was the invention of the adjective: no spell or incantation in Faërie is more potent. (OFS 41)

I bring in this passage now to underscore the point that language is important not only in the extrinsic, technical sources of the sublime that I shall discuss here in Longinus, but to the intrinsic sources of the sublime—grandeur of conception and powerful emotions—articulated broadly by Longinus, fleshed out and defined by Tolkien, and incorporated into what I am calling the "fantastic sublime." Language is fundamental to the whole phenomenon.

Having asserted that, we can now return to Longinus's five sources of the sublime. I mentioned these briefly earlier, but I shall let Longinus himself briefly explain each one here:

> The first and most important is the ability to form grand conceptions, as I have explained in my work on Xenophon. Second comes the stimulus of powerful and inspired emotion. These two elements of the sublime are very largely innate, while the remainder are the product of art – that is, [third,] the proper formation of the two types of figure, figures of thought and figures of speech, together with noble diction, which in its turn may

> be resolved into the choice of words and the use of imagery and elaborated language. The fifth source of grandeur, which embraces all those I have already mentioned, is dignified and elevated word-arrangement. (Longinus, ch. 8)

Since Longinus speaks of the innate sources of the sublime in fairly vague and general terms—and indeed an entire section of the treatise dedicated to the emotions is missing—I will first discuss the extrinsic sources, since these comprise Longinus's unique contribution to the "fantastic sublime," and conclude this section by introducing the intrinsic sources as a way of transitioning into Tolkien, who develops these ideas more fully.

Longinus's explanation for the third source of the sublime, the proper use of figures of thought and speech, relies a great deal on the very specific language of Greek rhetoric. But, as Longinus himself reminds us, it is important not to get too lost in the weeds of all these rhetorical flourishes:

> We next come to the topic of rhetorical figures, for they too, when properly handled, will contribute in no small measure, as I have said, to the effect of [the sublime]. However, since it would be a long and indeed endless business to consider them all closely at this stage, I shall now explain a few of those which make for grandeur of utterance, simply in order to confirm my proposition. (Longinus, ch. 16)

Rather, in some ways, it is enough simply to observe and note that the proper and judicious use of rhetorical figures can enhance or even conjure up the sublime quality of a given passage. But, of course, examples can be instructive, and Longinus obliges by providing several over the subsequent few chapters. I shall follow suit, attempting to highlight rhetorical figures of particular importance to fantasy and the fantastic sublime.

One notable rhetorical figure that receives significant attention, and expansion, from Longinus is *polyptoton*. As Penelope Murray observes in her explanatory notes in the Penguin Classics translation of Longinus: "Strictly speaking, *polyptoton* is the use of more than one case of the same word, but Longinus seems to apply it also to rhetorical effects gained by changes in number, person, tense, or gender" (Longinus, notes).[1] Shakespeare's "Love is not love / which alters when it alteration finds" (Sonnet 116, lines 2-3) is an example of *polyptoton* in its traditional, narrow sense; the root "alter" repeats twice in line 3, first as a verb and then as a substantive noun. But Longinus expands the concept to apply to the grammatical transformation of any word out of the gender, number, or tense in which it normally appears. An example of this broader definition of *polyptoton* occurs in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* when, in comparing the timid but kindly Neville Longbottom to the scheming Draco Malfoy, Harry tells Neville, "You're worth twelve of Malfoy" (Rowling, ch. 13). The rhetorical device of pluralizing Malfoy, in a moment that I would call sublime, has the effect of elevating Neville Longbottom in value far beyond normal bounds.

Polyptoton in this broader Longinian sense, and indeed many other rhetorical figures, create a sense of the fantastic sublime because they embody, for a fleeting moment, a fantasy in microcosm. To take the above example from Harry Potter, it creates a world in the reader's mind, if only for a moment, in which there actually *are* twelve Draco Malfoys, and yet they still do not amount in value to a single, singular Neville

[1] And, as the popular writer Mark Forsyth wryly observes, "It has a silly name which sounds a bit like polyp, a word for a nasal growth" (Forsyth, ch. 2).

Longbottom. When executed properly, as it is here, this technique is not intrusive enough to disrupt the reader's experience of the overall text, but it elevates the discourse of the text as a whole.

Another example from Longinus's catalogue of rhetorical figures deserves special attention is *hyperbaton*, which the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines as "a figure of speech by which the normal order of words in a sentence is significantly altered" (*ODLT*, "hyperbaton"). This is an almost exact echo of Longinus's observation that it consists of "the arrangement of words or ideas out of their normal sequence" (Longinus, ch. 22). The figure of *hyperbaton* is noteworthy for two reasons. First, it prefigures Longinus's fifth source of the sublime, "dignified and elevated word-arrangement" (Longinus, ch. 8). Indeed, it could be argued that *hyperbaton* is but a manifestation of this broader source of the sublime at the level of sentence and phrase. Second, the durability and universality of *hyperbaton* and some of Longinus's other rhetorical figures emphasizes the universality of the sublime across languages and historical periods. In a syntactic language like English, where word order does a lot of the work of carrying meaning, *hyperbaton*'s impact is immediately observed and felt, as in the example from Milton cited by the *ODLT*: "Him the Almighty Power / hurled headlong flaming from th'etherial sky" (I.44-45). But in the inflected languages of Classical Greek and Latin that Longinus knew, word order is far less important in constructing meaning, which is instead conveyed through case and tensed endings affixed to words, regardless of their relative position. In this context, Longinus's association between *hyperbaton* and the sublime is much more significant. Thus the persistence and

durability of *hyperbaton* across languages and centuries speaks to the universality of the sublime in language.

Along with rhetoric, Longinus rightly considers "noble diction" to be an extrinsic, artistic source of the sublime in literature. Like rhetoric, though, his thoughts on diction, and subsequent writers' responses to them, reveal more fundamental qualities of the sublime in general, and the fantastic sublime in particular. As Longinus says when introducing the topic, "in discourse, thought and diction are for the most part mutually interdependent" (Longinus, ch. 30), again returning us to the idea, discussed above, of the close interconnection between language and the mind.

The crux of the problem in working with Longinus's definition of "noble diction" is defining exactly what he means by "noble," as we shall see again when talking about the sublime's intrinsic source of grandeur of conception. And it is here in the discussion of diction that, as I promised in the introduction, Romantic thought actually becomes relevant to the discussion. For Longinus makes an argument about diction that would find restatement and amplification in William Wordsworth's 1802 preface to the groundbreaking poem collection *Lyrical Ballads*. Longinus baldly asserts that "[a] common phrase is sometimes much more expressive than elegant diction, for, being taken from everyday life, it is at once recognized, and carries the more conviction from its familiarity" (Longinus, ch. 31). This simple, almost off-hand statement neatly prefigures the entire philosophical thrust of Wordsworth's contribution to *Lyrical Ballads*. In the "Preface," Wordsworth dismisses abstractions and other poetic flourishes:

> I have proposed to myself to imitate, and, as far as is possible, to adopt the very language of men; and assuredly such personifications do not make

> any natural or regular part of that language. They are, indeed, a figure of speech occasionally prompted by passion, and I have made use of them as such; but I have endeavored utterly to reject them as a mechanical device of style. (Wordsworth, "Preface to Lyrical Ballads")

This is but one of many similar statements that pepper the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*. While I have not yet found direct evidence for Wordsworth reading Longinus, it seems likely to me that he would have, given the prevalence of discourse about the sublime in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The attainment of "noble" diction through the "common phrase" introduces a paradox into the sublime, a paradox that actually has far-reaching implications for the "fantastic sublime" specifically. Wordsworth takes great pains to disabuse us of the notion that poetry must consist of ornate, elegant language ornamented with myriad figures of speech in order to be effective. But Wordsworth's contemporary Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his 1817 *Biographia Literaria* objects to Wordsworth's (and by extension Longinus's) premise. He sums up his counter-argument thus: "I object, in the very first instance, to an equivocation in the use of the word 'real." Every man's language varies, according to the extent of his knowledge, the activity of his faculties, and the depth or quietness of his feelings. Every man's language has, first, its individualities; secondly, the common properties of the class to which it belongs; and thirdly, words and phrases of universal use" (BL II.55). So Coleridge seems to take issue with the very notion that there is, in fact, a singular "real language of men" as a standard to which all writers should aspire. And even if there were, Coleridge would argue, such a thing would not be desirable.

What seems to be at the heart of this issue—and here is how this debate relates to the fantastic sublime—is to what extent literature should attempt to emulate reality. And fantasy literature, or really any literature imbued with the fantastic sublime, by definition contains elements of the unreal or fantastic, whether in its language or its narrative. This tension can never really be resolved, either in its narrow or broader sense. Language by definition entails a degree of common understanding and mutual intelligibility, so even the most convoluted, esoteric English text will contain elements, if only in its grammar, syntax, and punctuation, that can be understood by any literate English speaker. But, by contrast, owing to differences of individuality and class, there is no way to realize Wordsworth's dream of writing poetry that will be absolutely comprehended by everyone. Similarly, in the parallel debate between reality and fantasy, it is impossible to create anything fantastic that does not have at least some basis in reality, however slight, if it is to be understood and appreciated by readers. Tolkien says as much in his essay "On Fairy-Stories":

> For creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it. So upon logic was founded the nonsense that displays itself in the tales and rhymes of Lewis Carroll. If men really could not distinguish between frogs and men, fairy-stories about frog-kings would not have arisen. (OFS 65)

None of these writers, from Longinus to Tolkien, has satisfactorily resolved this tension, between the common diction and the high, between the real and the fantastic. Fortunately, at least in the context of the fantastic sublime, it does not need resolution. In fact, the fantastic sublime draws much of its power from this and other tensions. As Longinus insists, the sublime has the effect of elevating both author and audience, and this

elevation demands force and movement, and a certain overcoming of resistance. So by introducing this resistance, these tensions fulfill a vital role in the fantastic sublime.

Upon the last of Longinus's extrinsic sources for the sublime, word arrangement, I shall touch only briefly, since it is perhaps the least relevant to the construction of the fantastic sublime. I already foreshadowed this idea when noting that the rhetorical figure of *hyperbaton* prefigures this source of sublimity at the phrase or sentence level. His observations and suggestions regarding word arrangement mainly concern the harmony of the sound of language. While this is indeed crucial to instilling an audience with a sense of the sublime, this is a general observation and has fewer implications for the fantastic sublime. For reflective, case-based languages like Greek and Latin, word arrangement can carry more weight, but English's syntactic structure places firm limits on just how much an author can play with word arrangement and retain meaning. Of course, these rules can be bent considerably in the composition of poetry, which can be enough sometimes to lend even the most prosaic poem, topically speaking, a fantastic air.

Let us return to Longinus's two intrinsic, natural sources of the sublime: intensity of emotion and grandeur of conception. Though there is little in the way of Longinus's treatment of the emotion that touches on the fantastic, this piece of the puzzle nevertheless remains an important component of the fantastic sublime, since the arousal of strong emotion is one of the foremost strengths of fantastic literature. Moreover, at least in regards to the fantastic sublime, emotions are inextricably linked to grandeur of conception. A brief discussion of grandeur as a source for the sublime will then carry us into the section on Tolkien, who explores these ideas much more fully.

The extant portion of Longinus's treatise on the sublime concludes: "It is best to leave these things be, and to pass on to the next problem, that is, the emotions, about which I previously undertook to write in a separate treatise, for they seem to me to share a place in literature generally, and especially in the sublime" (Longinus, ch. 44). The promised section on the emotions, along with the separate treatise on the subject mentioned in this passage, is now lost. So we have an incomplete picture of Longinus's views on the role the emotions have to play in the sublime. But it is clear that they do play a central role. Not only does he name "the stimulus of powerful and inspired emotion" as one of the five sources of the sublime, but he also makes repeated references to the emotions through the remainder of the text, though not in a systematic way, as doubtless he does in the lost portion.

One aspect of the use of the emotions in creating the sublime is purely practical. Just as modern filmmakers try to tell an emotionally compelling story on-screen in order to divert attention away from the artifice of special effects and the like, Longinus suggests that "sublimity and the expression of strong emotion are, therefore, a wonderfully helpful antidote against the suspicion that attends the use of figures. The cunning artifice remains out of sight, surrounded by the brilliance of beauty and sublimity, and all suspicion is put to flight (Longinus, ch. 17). On the other hand, rhetorical figures can sometimes be employed to emphasize emotion and lend an air of natural feeling to a text. In the chapter on *hyperbaton*, or inversion, he argues that the technique is best used when it carries, "so to speak, the genuine stamp of powerful emotion." He notes that, when people are in a state of agitated emotion, "they will keep

altering the arrangement of their words and ideas, losing their natural sequence and introducing all sorts of variations. In the same way the best authors will use hyperbaton in such a way that imitation approaches the effects of nature" (Longinus, ch. 22). In both instances, the presence of powerful emotions adds a verisimilitude to a literary work, no matter how ornate its language or fantastic its content.

Since works of fantasy are, by their very nature, so alien to their audience in some ways, emotions play a doubly vital role in the fantastic sublime. Their presence can sometimes indeed be the only solid footing in a world where everything is strange and uncertain; they are a lifeline, an umbilical cord, that allows a reader to become fully immersed in a fantasy world while still retaining a connection to this one. And, as Longinus would have it, they also serve another function by concealing, as it were, the artifice of fantasy. But in works of fantasy, I would argue that, rather than concealing artifice, the presence of real, true-to-life emotions also offer the reader a way to connect with the otherwise-otherworldly characters and situations.

To illustrate this point, I return briefly to the example I used earlier from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* when discussing the rhetorical device of *polyptoton*. When Harry Potter tells Neville Longbottom that "you're worth twelve of Malfoy," the rhetorical device may add weight behind the thrust, but the sublime impact of this remark, is its emotion. Even without knowing the characters or the situation, a reader cannot help but be struck the sheer boldness, magnanimity, and goodness of this statement.

In his 1891 essay "On the Fantastic Imagination," George MacDonald, discussed at greater length below, makes a case for morality, closely intertwined with emotion, as the one necessary constant even in the most inventive of fantasy worlds:

> The laws of the spirit of man must hold, alike in this world and in any world he may invent. It was no offence to suppose a world in which everything repelled instead of attracted the things around it; it would be wicked to write a tale representing a man it called good as always doing bad things, or a man it called bad as always doing good things: the notion itself is lawless. In physical things a man may invent; in moral things he must obey—and take their laws with him into his invented world as well. (MacDonald, "Fantastic Imagination)

Though recent works of fantasy like George R. R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones* series are showing decisively—sadly, in my view—that morality can be dispensed with in a successful work of fantasy, even Martin's work cannot do away with the emotions. So in a modified version of MacDonald's statement, it might be said that it is the emotions that must be taken into man's invented worlds. This view is quite consistent with both Longinus and Tolkien, and highlights the importance of pathos to the fantastic sublime.

So far we have been examining the sublime either in the context of the work of literature itself or of the audience reading it. But here in discussing the emotions, and again in dealing with grandeur of conception, Longinus also stresses the presence of the sublime within the author or creator of a work of art. Phrases like "inspired emotion" (ch. 8) imply that, in order for an author to fill his text with powerful emotions and rouse his audience to these emotions, he must first experience them, or at any rate be open to them, himself. This ancient idea about inspiration and emotion finds currency in modernity through the voice of a Romantic poet, once again William Wordsworth in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Throughout this preface, Wordsworth calls attention to the poet's unique

and peculiar ability both to experience intense emotions and channel their expression, most famously in his declaration that "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth, "Preface").

This sets the stage for Longinus's other intrinsic source of the sublime, grandeur of conception. For Longinus, this is the *sine quā non* of the sublime; no rhetorical figure, however well-formed, or emotional flourish, however powerful, can convey the sublime without grandeur of conception. Longinus situates this grandeur of conception squarely within the mind of a text's author, though as a critic he inevitably finds traces of it in the works great authors leave behind. In keeping with Plato, Longinus believes that grandeur, or genius, or even the essence of sublimity itself, is a gift of nature. But, he goes on to say, "even though it is a gift rather than an acquired characteristic, we should do all we can to train our minds towards greatness, perpetually impregnating them, so to speak, with noble thoughts" (Longinus, ch. 9). Although these gifts are innate, he advocates for cultivating a system, or art, of the sublime:

> Nature is the first cause and the fundamental creative principle in all activities, but the function of a system is to prescribe the degree and the right moment for each, and to lay down the clearest rules for use and practice. Furthermore, grandeur is exposed to greater dangers when it is left to itself without the ballast and stability of knowledge; it needs the curb as often as the spur. (Longinus, ch. 2)

These lines are to some extent an *apologia* or justification for the remainder of the treatise, which deals primarily with technical matters, even if these techniques are in the service of a sublime. So, too, do I quote this passage as a rationale for dwelling at such length on Longinus. As I said in the introduction, I argue that it is difficult to arrive at the greater and higher psychological, philosophical, and spiritual truths that are the domain of

the fantastic sublime in literature without a thorough grounding in how the sublime operates on a literary and textual level.

Unfortunately, although Longinus holds grandeur and nobility of spirit to be the primary wellspring of the sublime, he never defines the terms directly. He identifies what grandeur is *not*—tumidity, frigidity, or puerility of language—and he points to some ways in which grandeur can be cultivated in writing, but he never states outright what nobility of spirit means. Instead, we get maddening passages like this one: "Well, I have written elsewhere to this effect: 'Sublimity is the echo of a noble mind'" (Longinus, ch. 9). Once again we come up against the historical inevitability of lost documents. More frustrating, though, is the circular nature of the statement "sublimity is the echo of a noble mind," for it seems that for a mind to become ennobled involves at least some exposure to sublimity.

Ironically, however, it may be precisely this open-ended question of grandeur and nobility that generated so much interest in and work on the sublime in the eighteenth century and beyond. Had Longinus been more direct or complete in identifying just what comprised grandeur of conception or nobility of spirit, would there be room for Edmund Burke to explore the interrelation between the sublime and terror? Would Immanuel Kant have felt he had the necessary latitude to apply the sublime to morality and the mind? Or, for that matter, would I (if I dare place myself in the company of Burke and Kant) be able to conceive of the notion of the fantastic sublime? Longinus's vagueness on this subject also speaks to the sublime's paradoxical, two-sided quality that has been touched on before. Once again this ungraspable nature of the sublime finds eloquent expression in

the words of a Romantic poet, this time John Keats. In an 1818 letter Keats relates, while pondering literary greatness:

> at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason. (Keats 109)

Keats isn't here specifically referencing the sublime, and yet the spirit of his "negative capability," a tolerance for paradox, uncertainty, and ambiguity, seems to go hand in hand with much discussion of the sublime in any historical period. An air of "negative capability," incidentally, is also quite helpful to assume when approaching works of fantasy, or the fantastic sublime. More on Keats's influence on the "fantastic sublime" follows in the concluding section.

Longinus does make one concrete observation about grandeur of conception that both validates my decision to include him as a pillar of the fantastic sublime and serves as the perfect transition into a discussion of Tolkien. For he highlights visualization, or *phantasia*, as one of the means by which grandeur can be cultivated:

> Furthermore, my dear boy, dignity, grandeur, and urgency are to a very large degree derived from visualization (phantasia). That, at any rate, is the term I use for what some people call the production of images. In a general way the term phantasia is used of any mental conception, from whatever sources it presents itself, which gives rise to speech; but in current usage the word is applied to passages in which, carried away by enthusiasm and emotion, you imagine you are actually seeing the subject of your description, and bring it before the eyes of your audience. (Longinus, ch. 15)

He cites as an example a scene in Euripides's *Phaethon*, now lost, where the Sun hands the reigns of his Chariot to the young protagonist. After relating the scene, he asks

rhetorically: “Now, would you not say that the soul of the poet goes into the chariot with the boy, sharing his danger and joining the horses in their flight? For,” he goes on, “he could never have visualized such things had he not been swept along, keeping pace with those celestial bodies” (Longinus, ch. 15). Though Aristotle speaks in passing of fantastic elements in his *Poetics*, I venture to propose that Longinus was the first theorist of fantasy literature.

In this section we have examined some of the nuts-and-bolts of the fantastic sublime, drawing primarily on the work of the Greek rhetorician and critic Longinus. Next we will turn to the higher levels of the fantastic sublime, “the whithertos and whyfors,” to steal a colloquialism from *The Lord of the Rings*, as primarily expressed in J. R. R. Tolkien’s lecture-turned-essay “On Fairy-Stories.” We have considered the sublime; now it is time to turn our attention to the fantastic. Recalling the introduction, however, it is important to keep in mind that, for our purposes, these concepts are inextricably linked. Just as we have had occasion to occasionally look forward to Tolkien in the discussion of Longinus, so too will we occasionally look back to Longinus. And, once again, the Romantic era will serve as an important intermediary in the discussion, since so many relevant ideas were developed by the thinkers of that age.

Chapter 3

Tolkien and the Fantastic

J. R. R. Tolkien first delivered "On Fairy-Stories" as a lecture at St. Andrews in Scotland in honor of the revered Scottish folklorist Andrew Lang on 8 March 1939 (Flieger and Anderson 15), and he subsequently published it in his 1955 collection *Tree and Leaf*. Just as Longinus's *Peri* hypsous is the first fully-formed (surviving) treatise on the sublime that has come down to us, Tolkien's essay is the first effort to fully explore the fantastic from a consistent critical viewpoint. Other English critics—Sir Philip Sidney, Joseph Addison, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and George MacDonald—touched on aspects of fantasy in their criticism or even, in the case of MacDonald, wrote smaller pieces on the subject, but Tolkien is the first to treat the subject in a serious, sustained, systematic manner.

Before venturing further, I should make one point of clarification regarding terminology. What Tolkien calls fairy-stories should not be confused with tales about diminutive winged folk, as Tolkien makes quite clear in his lecture. Instead, he uses the term much as we would refer to the genre of fantasy in modern parlance. I shall therefore use the terms "fairy story" and "fantasy literature" more or less interchangeably. Confusingly, though, Tolkien also employs the word Fantasy to refer to something quite specific, as one of the values of fairy-stories. In this context, the word will always be capitalized to distinguish it from fantasy literature.

Tolkien's essay complements Longinus's treatise so well because he addresses precisely those areas of the sublime (though he never uses the word) that Longinus leaves

vague and open-ended—namely grandeur of conception and the role of the emotions. After some introductory matter on what comprises fairy-stories and whence they came, Tolkien comes to the heart of his essay: the value of fairy-stories. These are, in his framework, fantasy, recovery, escape, and consolation. As seen in figure 1 in the introduction, fantasy corresponds loosely to Longinus's technical extrinsic arts of the sublime, discussed at length above. That is, in Tolkien's framework, fantasy represents the artistry by which fairy stories are created. Though this artistry, powered by the imagination, is the engine that drives the creation of fairy stories and the fantastic sublime, it is beyond Tolkien's scope to try to explain its workings from a technical, practical standpoint.

Like Longinus, Tolkien views grandeur of conception as the *sine quā non* of fantasy. Throughout the course of his essay, Tolkien has occasion to call out several works of so-called fantasy for their shortcomings, but he reserves special scorn for Michael Drayton's 1627 long poem *Nymphidia,* which is essentially poetic fan-fiction based on William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He tones down the criticism of the poem slightly in the final lecture and essay, but the first extant manuscript of the lecture draft shows this criticism unbridled and, more importantly to our purpose, reveals its cause:

> One of the worst fairy stories ever written, Drayton's Nymphidia is about 'fairies' and fairies only. There the palace of Oberon has walls of spider legs 'and windows of the eyes of cats and for the roof, instead of slats is covered with the wings of bats.' . . . The unhappy tale of Lancelot and Guinevere—tragic and full of good and evil is a fairy story rather than this. For fairy-stories proper are grim, serious and high matter [strikethrough from original MS] of matters simpler or higher than these. (OFS 177).

So, to Tolkien, and to my conception of the fantastic sublime, it is not enough simply for a poem, story, or novel to contain, or even consist largely of, fantastic elements. These are but the trappings of the fantastic sublime. This isn't to say that Drayton's poem or works of a similar nature don't hold any value whatsoever as stories in and of themselves; they simply have no place in a discussion of "real" or sublime fantasy. The missing component is an aim to address "matters simpler or higher;" or, as Longinus would put it, grandeur of conception.

Even the phrase "matters simpler or higher" resonates with the paradoxical, two-sided quality of the sublime, its power to at once elevate and humble both author and audience. The true matter of fantasy, like the truths Wordsworth was striving to capture in his poems, are "simple" because they are, to borrow an anthropological term, human universals, but they are also "high" precisely because they are so fundamental to human thought. To Tolkien, this sublime grandeur of conception in fantasy lies in its ability to satisfy certain innate human longings.

> The magic of Faërie [or fantasy literature] is not an end in itself, its virtue is in its operations: amongst these are the satisfaction of certain primordial human desires. One of these desires is to survey the depths of space and time. Another is . . . to hold communion with other living things. A story may thus deal with the satisfaction of these desires, with or without the operation of either machine or magic, and in proportion as it succeeds it will approach the quality and have the flavour of fairy-story. (OFS 34-35)

This last statement goes a long way toward explaining why fantasy is so difficult to classify as a genre, especially for the modern taxonomic mind so eager to put everything in its proper place. For as Tolkien points out, even works that have no magic, machinery, or imagination of the purely inventive variety can take on the air of fantasy if they

achieve some of the same ends or satisfy the same desires. Thus works of historical fiction, magical realism, and even nonfiction, to name only a few, can easily appropriate the fantastic sublime.

Of the two desires mentioned in this passage, the first, surveying the depths of space and time, is fairly straightforward. Historically humans have been bound, in one way or another, to the land of their birth, with limited means of actually traveling the world in a physical sense. Thus the desire to travel the length and breadth of this world and beyond through the vehicle of story seems completely justified. One might argue that this human desire has diminished somewhat with the advent of fast, inexpensive transportation via trains, planes, and automobiles, and the free and easy exchange of information via the Internet. But I contend that globalization and uniformity may actually have the opposite effect, intensifying mankind's desire to seek out far-away times and places. The recent surge in popularity of books and shows like *A Game of Thrones* and *The Hunger Games* would seem to support this position. In any event, it is the fulfillment of this desire that lends a fantastic air to works like John Keats's 1816 sonnet "On first looking into Chapman's Homer," which transforms the prosaic act of reading into a journey across oceans, atop mountains, and even to distant planets.

The second desire mentioned by Tolkien, "communion with other living things," requires more explanation. Stories with talking animals or other sentient, anthropomorphized beings would seem to fulfill this desire, but Tolkien cautions against such an interpretation. He contrasts between the true fulfillment of this desire in fantasy or fairy-story and its mere simulacrum in what he calls "beast fable":

> But in stories in which no human being is concerned; or in which the animals are the heroes and heroines, and men and women, if they appear, are mere adjuncts; and above all those in which the animal form is only a mask upon a human face, a device of the satirist or the preacher, in these we have beast-fable and not fairy-story . . .” (OFS 36)

This is another variation on the theme that, to paraphrase Tolkien’s earlier condemnation of Michael Drayton’s *Nymphidia*, just because it walks like fantasy and talks like fantasy, it may not actually be true fantasy. It also keeps with the *leitmotif* of Longinus’s grandeur of conception. These “beast-fables,” as Tolkien’s call them, fail as fantasy because they do nothing to stimulate the contemplation of “matters simpler or higher.” They represent the mundane matters of mankind masked in the guise of fantasy. Thus, for example, folk tales like *The Three Little Pigs* and *Brer Rabbit* are not sublime fantasy, for their characters walk, talk, and behave more like humans. The Bard’s failure to fulfill this desire likely also prompts Tolkien’s “bitter disappointment and disgust from schooldays with the shabby use made in Shakespeare of the coming of ‘Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill’” (Letters 163). The prophecy in *Macbeth* promised a communion between man and tree of which the later appearance of mere soldiers bearing branches makes—in Tolkien’s view—a mockery.

Apart from the fulfillment of primordial human desires, fairy-stories offer four main values to their audience. “First of all,” he observes, “if written with art, the prime value of fairy-stories will simply be that value which, as literature, they share with other literary forms. “But,” he goes on, “fairy-stories offer also, in a peculiar degree or mode, these things: Fantasy, Recovery Escape, Consolation” (OFS 58-59). Again Tolkien emphasizes the importance of art and artistry not just in fairy-stories but in the

composition of literature as a whole, something which, as I said in my introduction, I think is lost in much literary criticism of today. Fantasy, as noted earlier, is concerned with the specific artistry of constructing fairy-stories, discussed in Longinus's extrinsic sources of the sublime above, along with the imagination, which I treat elsewhere. Recovery, Escape, and Consolation, however, represent the "matters simpler or higher" to which fairy-stories and the fantastic sublime aspire, and it is to these values that we now turn our attention.

The first of the intrinsic values of fantasy identified by Tolkien is that of Recovery, by which he means the recovery of clear sight, or the ability to see things clearly: "Recovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a re-gaining—regaining of a clear view. I do not say 'seeing things as they are' and involve myself with the philosophers, though I might venture to say 'seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them'—as things apart from ourselves" (OFS 67). He further argues that the purpose of Recovery in fantasy is "to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity" (OFS 67). This aim of clarity in vision mirrors Longinus's insistence on clarity in rhetoric, so that the one might be said to be in the service of the other.

Tolkien is not alone as a critic in highlighting the importance in art of removing the "drab blur of familiarity." The Russian literary critic Viktor Shklovsky in his 1917 essay "Art as Technique" coined the term "defamiliarization" as a way of explaining the mediating role that poetry can have between our perception of the world and the world itself. To Shklovsky, "[t]he technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make

forms difficult to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (Shklovsky 16). There are numerous differences between Shklovsky's theory and Tolkien's of course: the former is concerned with the purely aesthetic effects of defamiliarization, while the latter sees its ideological ramifications. But there is an undeniable kinship between the two theories, which are similar at their core. And while I have found no evidence to suggest that Tolkien was acquainted with Shklovsky's work, I still don't find it beyond the realm of possibility, given the Russian formalists' interest in fairy tales and Tolkien's great store of knowledge on the subject. In any case, Shklovsky's previous work lends some critical weight to Tolkien's own theory.

Tolkien uses as an example of defamiliarization the seemingly outlandish word "mooreeffoc," which in reality is simply the phrase "coffee room" spelled backwards. The word originates in Charles Dickens's abandoned autobiography, as quoted in G. K. Chesterton's own volume on the Victorian novelist. According to Chesterton, Dickens wrote: "where there is an inscription on glass, and [I] read it backwards on the wrong side, MOOR EEFFOC (as I often used to do then in a dismal reverie), a shock goes through my blood." Chesterton himself views "mooreeffoc" as the "motto of all effective realism . . . it is the masterpiece of the good realistic principle—the principle that the most fantastic thing of all is often the precise fact" (Chesterton). But Tolkien, for his part, cautions that the word has "only a limited power; for the reason that recovery of freshness of vision is its only virtue" (OFS 68). Thus Tolkien takes issue with defamiliarization or Recovery simply for its own sake.

What distinguishes real Recovery from this limited form of defamiliarization is "creative fantasy," or, as I would put it, grandeur of conception coupled with imagination.

> Creative fantasy, because it is mainly trying to do something else (make something new), may open your hoard and let all the locked things fly away like cage-birds. The gems all turn into flowers or flames, and you will be warned that all you had (or knew) was dangerous and potent, not really effectively chained, free and wild; no more yours than they were you. (OFS 68)

The sheer imaginative and poetic force of this passage mirrors Tolkien's vision for the role of Recovery in fantasy literature. I look at it this way. When we see "mooreeffoc" in a coffee house door, it is only a matter of walking through the door again before that strange world of the "mooreeffoc"—whatever it may be—suddenly becomes the mundane world of the "coffee room" once more. But reading a good work of creative fantasy, or exposure to the fantastic sublime, can transform our outlook on the world forever.

Tolkien introduces the value of Escape in fairy-story and fantasy literature on a defensive footing; evidently even in his day almost a hundred years ago the charge of "escapist" was being levelled at this kind of literature. Tolkien deftly defends the role of escape in literature by drawing a real-world parallel. "Why," he asks rhetorically, "should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it." In any other circumstance outside of literature, he argues, Escape is "practical" or even "heroic." And finally, he accuses critics of "confusing, not always by sincere error, the

Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter" (OFS 69). But, having defended Escape as something actually desirable, what are we escaping from, and what are we escaping to?

The sources and Escape again recall the ennobling power of the sublime. First, and perhaps least important, fantasy literature offers its audience an escape from the "rawness and ugliness" (OFS 72) of modern life; this, as a rule, seems to be the only facet of escape discerned by critics of fantasy, who, as Tolkien says, mistake it for desertion. But there are also more universal terrors from which it is right to escape, such as "hunger, thirst, poverty, pain, sorrow, injustice, death. And even when men are not facing hard things such as these, there are ancient limitations from which fairy-stories offer a sort of escape . . . And lastly there is the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death" (73-74). This transcendent power of fantasy literature, offering its readers an escape from modern cares and ancient limitations alike, separates works of the fantastic sublime from stories that wear only the trappings of fantasy.

If modern perils and ancient limitations are what we Escape from, then what we rush towards is Tolkien's last and most important value of fairy-stories: Consolation. The idea of Consolation is largely bound up with the fulfillment of primordial human desires—surveying the depths of space and time, communion with living things—touched upon earlier. Here in the context of Consolation, Tolkien calls these desires "ancient as the Fall," an expression that is not at all accidental. "Far more important" than the Consolation provided by the fulfillment of these desires "is the Consolation of the

Happy Ending" (OFS 75), which Tolkien associates ultimately with the incarnation and resurrection of Christ.

Tolkien's Consolation of the Happy Ending depends on a narrative "turn," what he calls *eucatastrophe,* a compound of the traditional meaning of the Greek word "catastrophe" with the Greek prefix "eu-," or good. This concept of *eucatastrophe* brings the discussion of the fantastic sublime full circle, since it epitomizes the central qualities both of Longinus's sublime and Tolkien's vision of fairy-stories. But the term deserves fuller explanation before its central role in the fantastic sublime can be examined. As Tolkien explains *eucatastrophe* as:

> The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn' (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale) . . . In its fairy-tale—or otherworld—setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe [bad catastrophe] of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief. (OFS 75)

The presence of the word *evangelium* in this passage, meaning "good news" and rendered into English as gospel, is perhaps evidence enough of Tolkien's religious views. But in the essay's Epilogue he makes this even more explicit: "The Birth of Christ is the *eucatastrophe* of Man's history. The Resurrection is the *eucatastrophe* of the story of the Incarnation" (78).

In drawing attention to Tolkien's application of *eucatastrophe* to Christianity, I do not mean to suggest that the concept of the fantastic sublime has any intrinsic connection with or dependence on a Christian world view. But it is necessary to share Tolkien's

interpretation of the Incarnation and Resurrection as *eucatastrophe* to emphasize just how powerful the concept is, and how important it was to Tolkien himself. Moreover, if we are to accept Tolkien's suggestion that the Consolation of the Happy Ending represents the fulfillment of the Escape from Death, it cannot be denied, regardless of one's personal religious leanings, that the Gospel remains one of the most persistent and resilient stories about that Escape.

Armed with a fuller understanding of *eucatastrophe,* let us now return to examine how it brings together the Longinian sublime with the Tolkienian fantastic. Throughout this discussion of Tolkien's essay "On Fairy-Stories," I have attempted to show how Tolkien's ideas about fantasy lend definition and color to Longinus's vague conceptions of "nobility" and "grandeur." Few ideas can be nobler or grander, in my view, than *eucatastrophe,* with its unlooked-for "sudden and miraculous grace, never to be counted on to recur." And its quality of "joy, joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief" easily meets Longinus's requirement that the sublime arises from "powerful and inspired emotion." *Eucatastrophe* also shares other qualities with the Longinian sublime. In his study on the sublime, Robert Doran notes Longinus's emphasis on *kairos,* a Greek word meaning "moment" and in this context suggests that the sublime, like *eucatastrophe,* is something that occurs in a discrete moment in time, out of the blue, as it were. *Eucatastrophe* also shares with the sublime a penchant for paradox. In the case of *eucatastrophe* the paradox is between joy and grief. Tolkien asserts that It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe* of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance." But here Tolkien does not go far enough. I would argue that it

is not merely *possible* for sorrow and failure to coexist with *eucatastrophe*, but absolutely *essential*. In the Resurrection, Christ really did have to die. The joy of *eucatastrophe* is "poignant as grief" because there *is* grief. But just as the sublime strives toward nobility of spirit, *eucatastrophe* strives toward joy.

Chapter 4

The Romantic Contribution: Coleridge and the Imagination

Though Romantic writers have been brought into the conversation several times thus far as occasion merits, it is now time to turn our full attention to their contribution to the fantastic sublime. For if Longinus and Tolkien provide the theoretical building blocks of this aesthetic and critical approach, then the Romantics provide its ideological mortar, an all-pervasive, unifying factor without which the great towers of modern fantasy literature would topple. The primary contributor in this regard is Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose writings on the imagination in the *Biographia Literaria* influenced Victorian and modern fantasists alike.

Before setting out on this particular path of inquiry, though, it still remains, perhaps, to firm up in the reader's mind the inextricable link between the sublime and the imagination. I have touched on it tangentially several times already, as in Longinus's argument for the importance of visualization (*phantasia*) and imagination to crafting a well-told story. But neither Longinus nor any other writer past or present I've yet encountered has made an explicit attempt to connect the imagination with the sublime. So I shall attempt to do so.

What binds the concept of imagination and the framework of the sublime so closely together is that both demand a change in perspective and an expansion of awareness. We have already encountered the paradox of the sublime, its reliance on the space created by uncertainty in reader and even author, and its kinship with Keats's conception of negative capability. And Robert Doran, in his recent study on the sublime, takes pains to highlight this paradox at the heart of the sublime at every step of the way.

Indeed, this paradox lies at the crux of his argument, for he argues that "what unites the key theories of sublimity . . . is a common structure—the paradoxical experience of being at once *overwhelmed* and *exalted*—and a common concern: the preservation of a notion of transcendence in the face of secularization of modern culture" (Doran, Introduction). The second part of that sentence almost seems as though it could have been written by Tolkien himself, with his rejection of modern technology and mores, but let us focus instead on the critical implications of Doran's statement.

Doran's paradox of being at once both exalted and overwhelmed suggests that the sublime brings about a change of perspective, a shift in how we see ourselves in relation to the world around us. We are exalted because we see the great power and potential of the soul, in the case of the Kantian sublime, or the mind, in Shelley's "Mont Blanc" for instance. Yet that same power also sweeps us away, renders us utterly insignificant in the swirling sea of uncertain power flecked with possibility. It isn't a far stretch to say that true instances of the sublime truly take us out of our bodies and out of our minds. Imagination has a similar effect of both magnifying and diluting the self and the mind, as we'll come to in a moment. But even the lay understanding of imagination admits that it insists on a change of perspective, a temporary relocation and refocusing of the mind.

I might almost venture to say that the imagination is the agent of the sublime, the doorway through which the sublime's immeasurable force is channeled through an author's mind, tingling down his arm, and finally into his pen, where it alights in a word or turn of phrase to ensnare and empower an unwary reader. At present, though, I feel I lack the theoretical and philosophical gymnastic ability needed to express precisely how this agency would work. For the present, then, I hope merely to have shown that there *is* a

connection between the imagination and the sublime. That connection will come into focus in the discussion of Coleridge, Tolkien, and their intermediary George MacDonald, that follows.

Aside from Coleridge, there are two other Romantic poets whose prose theory and criticism bear a strong relevance to the intersection of the imagination and the sublime, and whose influence echoes down through the decades to Tolkien and beyond. The first of these influences is John Keats, whom we have already encountered in the context of his formulation of "negative capability." In a letter to Richard Woodhouse dated 27 October 1818, Keats tries to get to the heart of exactly what constitutes poetic genius. In doing so, he first rejects the poetic applicability of the Goldsworthy or egotistical sublime, which, as its name implies, starts and ends with the self. Whereas other manifestations of the sublime, including the fantastic sublime which I am attempting to construct here, certainly make use of the idea of self as a vantage point, a point of reference from which to explore those paradoxes of omnipotence and insignificance, the ultimate source of the fantastic sublime, as well as its goal, is situated firmly outside the self. To Tolkien, that source and destination is obviously God, as evidenced by his use of Christian metaphor in "On Fairy-Stories." To other authors of the fantastic, the source may lie elsewhere. To Lewis Carroll, for example, the source of the sublime is quite often language itself, with its numerous joys, wonders, and bewilderments. Whatever its source, then, the fantastic sublime firmly disavows any relation with the Wordsworthian, egotistical sublime, which draws heavily, it seems to me, on Kant's postulation of the moral sublime.

This distinction between the egotistical sublime and other forms of the sublime, including the fantastic sublime, is important background for what Keats goes on to say next, for he outlines a theoretical framework that bears hallmarks of the imagination, the sublime, and, dare I say, even the fantastical sublime.

> A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity - he is continually in for - and filling some other Body - The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute - the poet has none; no identity - he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures. (Keats 102)

In this passage Keats employs neither the terms "imagination" nor "sublime," but since he denounces the egotistical sublime earlier in the letter, the concept is clearly on his mind, and this meandering sentence, and the letter as a whole, can be seen as a response and counterpoint to the Wordsworthian sublime. In Keats's typical paradoxical fashion, the poet himself is actually quite unpoetical, and is merely a vessel for the poetry of the world around him. This "camelion [sic] Poet," as Keats calls himself, takes on the hues, both light and dark, of the flora, fauna, people, and situations around him. These continual shifts in perspective, stature, and character require, at minimum, a strong faculty of imagination, outlined generally above and in more detail below; and, when these changes in color are executed properly and with sufficient skill (in this case skill with language, recalling Longinus), an unpoetical poet and his work may attain, if only for a moment, the essence of the sublime, a dizzying out-of-body experience felt by writer and reader alike.

In the introduction I noted that Tolkien's exposure to the Romantic poets, aside from his own voracious reading, likely came from his friend and fellow Inkling Owen Barfield, who never attained a fellowship at Oxford or elsewhere but who wrote about the

Romantics with passion and perception his entire life. In the case of Keats, however, I believe I can trace a more direct line of influence. The writings of the young, tuberculosis-stricken poet played a key role in the intellectual development of Gerard Manley Hopkins during his formative years (Bump 33-43). Hopkins became a Jesuit and, in his later years, wrote some of the most innovative and metrically daring verse of the Victorian age. Tolkien's opinions of Hopkins's poetry are not recorded, though I suspect he would have found it too heady and non-narrative for his liking. But Hopkins's fervent Catholicism must have resonated with Tolkien's own, and references to Hopkins crop up occasionally in Tolkien's letters. Hopkins is also known for his neologisms "inscape," which he uses to describe the unique and holistic qualities of individual entities on Earth (and why God put them there), and "in stress," which is the process by which these qualities are apprehended and expressed by the mind of an artist" (Gardner 7). There are striking resemblances between Keats's conception of the unpoetical poet, Hopkins's inscape, and Tolkien's view of the creative process.

The second Romantic poet who must be briefly considered before hurtling headlong into the narrative of imagination is Percy Bysshe Shelley, for he touches more directly on the subject of the imagination and its relation to creativity, poetry, and the fantastic sublime. In his 1821 essay "A Defense of Poetry," written in a "sacred rage," Shelley spills out his thoughts about the inner working of poetry and its influence on society. The piece is wide-ranging, encompassing aesthetic theory, cultural history, and critical theory. But the passages that concern us here deal with the imagination and the role it plays in the birth of poetic work.

That Shelley's essay of righteous indignation opens with a comparison of reason and imagination emphasizes the importance imagination plays in the whole poetic affair. The poet does not dismiss reason outright, but he does place the poetic act squarely in the realm of imagination. The treatise's first paragraph is worth quoting in full:

> According to one mode of regarding those two classes of mental action, which are called reason and imagination, the former may be considered as mind contemplating the relations borne by one thought to another, however produced, and the latter, as mind acting upon those thoughts so as to color them with its own light, and composing from them, as from elements, other thoughts, each containing within itself the principle of its own integrity. The one is . . . the principle of synthesis, and has for its objects those forms which are common to universal nature and existence itself; the other is the . . . principle of analysis, and its action regards the relations of things simply as relations; considering thoughts, not in their integral unity, but as the algebraical representations which conduct to certain general results. Reason is the enumeration of qualities already known; imagination is the perception of the value of those qualities, both separately and as a whole. Reason respects the differences, and imagination the similitudes of things. Reason is to imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance. (Shelley, paragraph 1)

Despite Shelley's rather stilted, hypotactic nineteenth-century prose, the relationship between the imagination and the sublime, and fantasy, stands out. While reason concerns itself with the known world, imagination casts its focus on the unknown. Or rather, it is more correct to say that the imagination seeks to find the unknown within these known quantities, and thus, paradoxically, to bring them together or synthesize them into the known, under the aegis of the mind. As we have seen, the sublime entails a similar yearning to bring to light the unknown in or above the known world.

It is worth noting that Shelly does not altogether discount reason in the creative process. He calls reason the instrument to imagination's agent. Reason may come to the aid of a poet as she seeks to frame the meter of her verse, or to count her numbers. And

reason can keep the details of a novelist's plot on an even keel. But just as a guitar is but a hunk of wood and sinew until a gifted musician plucks its strings, so too is reason, at least vis-à-vis the creative process, a lifeless lump until imbued with the color of imagination. Or, to use a more Romantic metaphor, the folia harp is naught but a pretty window adornment until strummed by the spirit of the wind and mind.

Later in the treatise, Shelley makes an observation in passing that is nevertheless crucial to both his argument and my own. In discussing the musical harmony of poetry and the continual need for poets to innovate in style, he stridently insists that "[the distinction between poets and prose writers is a vulgar error" (Shelley, paragraph 8). He argues that, by dint of their revolutionary fervor, writers like Plato and Cicero deserve the name of poet every bit as much as Homer or Vergil. For the purposes of the fantastic sublime, I too insist on dismantling this distinction between prose and poetry. In the preceding exploration of Longinus, and in the present discussion on the Romantic contribution to imagination, I make frequent references to specific poetry and poetics in general. But I certainly do not mean to suggest that the fantastic sublime is to be found only in poetry. It dwells with equal ease in both Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Longinus has shown us that an ear for language and a certain familiarity with poetic diction is essential to creating sublime work, in prose or verse, but like Shelley's "poetry,"" the fantastic sublime is blissfully unaware of form or genre.

Here I shall attempt to chronicle the rise of the imagination and fantastic literature through the theories of three writers, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, George MacDonald, and J. R. R. Tolkien. Each of these men wrote landmark works in what would become the

fantasy genre—Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Golden Key*, and Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. More importantly, though, each read widely and thought deeply about the role of the imagination and its implications in writing. Had they not done so, I argue, their own works would not have achieved such lasting success. I therefore will confine my discussion here to their expression of their imaginative credos in their non-fiction: Coleridge's *Biographic Literaria*, MacDonald's humbly-titled essay collection *A Dish of Orts*, and Tolkien's lecture "On Fairy-Stories." Whether she knows it or not, anyone writing in the fantasy genre today is indebted to the ideas outlined in these works.

My audience is likely already familiar with Coleridge's basic philosophy on the imagination, so I will try not to linger here too long. But since his ideas are so fundamental to subsequent discussions of the subject in MacDonald, Tolkien, and many others, it would still be helpful to briefly restate Coleridge's position for two reasons. First, Coleridge's definition of the imagination is fairly philosophical, and so illustrating its connections to the act of fantasy-writing is necessary. Second, both MacDonald and Tolkien respond to specific elements of Coleridge's argument, so laying a foundation with Coleridge is doubly important.

In the realm of the imagination, Coleridge makes three distinctions. First, he distinguishes between the primary and secondary imagination. The former he considers to be "the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM." That is, the primary imagination is not a conscious act but rather represents the way in which we perceive or experience, moment to moment, God's timeless and eternal creation. The latter he sees as

a conscious attempt to recreate the former. The secondary imagination "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify" (BL I.304). Second, he distinguishes both kinds of imagination from fancy, which has "no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites;" while it may resemble both types of imagination, it has no creative unifying force of its own, but "must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association" (BL I.305).

Coleridge does not say so, but from these definitions it follows that fantasy writing falls neatly within the realm of the secondary imagination. The primary imagination is the domain of God, and though it is the aim of the secondary imagination to strive for this domain, by definition it can never quite attain it. Fancy, on the other hand, is reserved for writers of more mundane prowess, who work with "fixities and definites." When he first brings up the subject of imagination in Chapter 4 of the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge notes that "Milton had a highly *imaginative*, Cowley a very *fanciful* mind" (BL I.84). Coleridge does not elaborate, but it is evident that he had more to say on the subject of the imagination's role in poetry. Indeed, he wrote a preface, sadly now lost, to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* in which he elaborated on the "uses of the Supernatural in poetry and the principles that regulate its introduction" (BL I.306). So although Coleridge's definitions of imagination and fancy are general, it is clear that he found this theory vital to the composition of poetry, or Supernatural poetry, or what would come to be called fantasy.

But it is also notable that Coleridge here attempts to "desynonymize"—a word which he himself had coined (BL I.82)—imagination and fancy, which is but a

contraction of fantasy (OED). He acknowledges the etymological similarities between the two terms, but, as we have seen, ascribes to them very different functions, clearly subordinating fancy to imagination in importance. In this respect he prefigures Shelley's "A Defense of Poetry," written four years after the publication of *Biographia Literaria*. Though I have found no direct evidence to suggest that Shelley read Coleridge's magnum opus, I find it hard to believe that some of Coleridge's ideas expressed therein did not circulate among the younger Romantics. In any case, when applied to the poetic arts, Shelley's assertion that "[r]Eason is the enumeration of qualities already known" sounds an awful lot like Coleridge's "fancy." The problem with this interpretation is merely that the term "reason" is laden with a lot of Enlightenment-era baggage, but once all that is stripped away, Coleridge's "fancy" and Shelley's "reason" actually line up quite nicely.

Sublimity is the litmus test that separates imagination from fancy. Nothing illustrates this point quite like Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. While the Oxford mathematician's work occasionally flashes with the sublime, as with Alice's initial plummet down the rabbit hole in pursuit of the white rabbit, the text too often devolves into protracted spells of fancy, a jumble of words and images that lose all light and meaning. This isn't necessarily an attack on Carroll's work; his prose and poetry, prefiguring postmodernism, excel at underscoring the potential meaninglessness of language. But this quality of his work disqualifies it from membership in the fantastic sublime. One brief example will suffice to illustrate this point. As Alice tumbles down and down, past cupboards and jars of orange marmalade, she begins to wax philosophical:

> And here Alice began to get rather sleepy, and went on saying to herself, in a dreamy sort of way, 'Do cats eat bats? Do cats eat bats?' and

> sometimes, 'Do bats eat cats?' for, you see, as she couldn't answer either question, it didn't much matter which way she put it (Carrol, ch. 1)

That last clause is a dead giveaway. In the realm of the fantastic sublime, it matters very much which way you put things. Authors might disagree as to why it matters—for Coleridge and Tolkien, God is the *why*, while for more contemporary fantasy writers like Neil Gaiman the fantastic sublime constitutes an end in its own right—but they all fundamentally agree, both linguistically and philosophically, that the order of things does matter. On a more basic level, the chiastic chant of "do cats eat bats?" and "do bats eat cats?" represents literally a mere playing around with fixities, without creating anything new or original from these building blocks.

Another famous Coleridgean concept is important to the development of the fantastic sublime: willing suspension of disbelief. In discussing his role in composing the *Lyrical Ballads* with William Wordsworth, Coleridge envisions his contributions to the volume as containing "a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination [that is, his poems] that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" (BL II.6). This willing suspension of disbelief is so crucial because it serves as a sort of measuring stick by which we can judge the extent of imagination present in a work of fantasy. The inclusion of the word "faith" introduces spiritual overtones that, far from accidental, are central to the fantastic in Coleridge and beyond. The willing suspension of disbelief aligns with central aspects of the imagination and the fantastic sublime that we have already explored: namely the ability of the reader as well as the author to temporarily expand the scope of her awareness beyond the Self and the real world surrounding it.

One final piece of Coleridge's prose ties all these ideas together, and in some ways sets the stage for the development of the modern incarnation of fantasy, and is crucial to my universal application of the fantastic sublime. It comes not from the *Biographia Literaria* but from a 1797 letter to Thomas Poole. After recounting his own experience reading "Faery Tales" he considers the value of such stories:

> Should children be permitted to read Romances, & Relations of Giants & Magicians, & Genii)-I know all that has been said against it; but I have formed my faith in the affirmative.-I know no other way of giving the mind a love of "the Great," & "the Whole."-Those who have been led to the same truths step by step thro' the constant testimony of their senses, seem to me to want a sense which I possess—They contemplate nothing but parts-and all parts are necessarily little-and the Universe to them is but a mass of little things. (Coleridge 623)

The tension between "the Great" and "little things" sounds quite a lot like the tension between imagination and fancy. And if Coleridge's ideas about imagination and the suspension of disbelief establish the "how" of fantasy writing, then this passage establishes the equally important "why" of fantasy. In my introduction, I criticized David M. Sandner for confining his discussion of the fantastic sublime to children's literature. Here Coleridge would seem to back me up. Though he begins this passage from the vantage point of children, he quickly expands his subject to "the mind" in general, as well as a much less age-specific "those." He argues vigorously for the reading of such tales in childhood, but he makes no indication at all that such readings and explorations should stop there.

The Scottish writer, poet, and minister George MacDonald was the preeminent fantasy writer of the Victorian era, though perhaps it is anachronistic to call him a fantasy writer, since the genre of fantasy had not yet been formally established. Still, many of his works bear the hallmarks of fantasy literature. From children's tales like *The Golden Key*

(1867) and *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) to more adult novels like *Phantastes* (1858) and *Lilith* (1895), MacDonald's work abounds with a sustained imaginative force, though unevenly and imperfectly executed, of which Coleridge might well have approved. This is no accident, for MacDonald was well-versed in the works of Coleridge, both prose and verse, as well as the German romantics who inspired and informed Coleridge.

MacDonald's essay collection *A Dish of Orts: Chiefly Papers on the Imagination, and on Shakespeare*, published in 1893, gathers together his critical work from the previous four decades or so. The collection is bookended by two pieces concerning the imagination. The first, "The Imagination: Its Functions and its Culture," originally written in 1867, concerns the imagination more generally, though it does make important distinctions concerning poetry and art. The second, "The Fantastic Imagination,"[2] originally appeared as a preface to an 1883 American edition of MacDonald's "so-called Fairy Tales," and addresses the question of imagination and fantasy in literature more directly. Both are worthy of consideration, since taken together they address many of the same issues as Coleridge does.

MacDonald attempts to establish the imagination as superior to the intellect and scientific endeavor, possibly as a reaction to the explosive progress of Victorian industrialization. "'Are there not facts?' say [the detractors]. 'Why forsake them for fancies? Is there not that which may be known? Why forsake it for inventions? What God hath made, into that let man inquire'" (MacDonald "Imagination"). This passage recalls

[2] I have as yet found nothing resembling a critical or authoritative edition of MacDonald's work, especially his non-fiction. I am thus relying on a Kindle edition from a relatively unknown publisher. However, these essays are in the public domain and can also easily be found online.

Coleridge's letter to Thomas Poole, and it also brings an image of the drab Thomas Gradgrind of Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* irresistibly to mind, with his insistence that "facts alone are wanted in life" (Dickens 5). In response to these rhetorical questions, MacDonald notes that "Coleridge says that no one but a poet will make any further great discoveries in mathematics." He goes on to argue that "the influence of the poetic upon the scientific imagination is, for instance, especially present in the construction of an invisible whole from the hints afforded by a visible part" (MacDonald "Imagination"). Here MacDonald also owes a debt to Coleridge's friend Wordsworth, who in the Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* compares the Man of Science, who "seeks truth as a remote and unknown benefactor" to the Poet, who "rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion" (Wordsworth "Preface"). Echoes also resonate here from Shelley's comparison of reason and imagination at the outset of his "A Defense of Poetry." A similar counterargument to critics of fantasy appears again in Tolkien and should not be understated, since in many ways it fuels the drive for fantasy writers to create works focused on, to quote Coleridge, "the Vast" and "the Great." As the title of this opening essay suggests, MacDonald advocates for a culture of imagination set against and ultimately above the prevailing culture of industry and science.

Like Coleridge, MacDonald makes a distinction between imagination and fancy. "When such forms [as stories] are new embodiments of old truths, we call them products of the Imagination; when they are mere inventions, however lovely, I should call them the work of the Fancy . . ." Unlike Coleridge, though, MacDonald sets fancy in the service of, rather than in opposition to, the imagination. For later in "Fantastic Imagination" he equates Imagination with "the tailor that cuts the garments to fit [the

truth],” and the Fancy with “his journeyman that puts the pieces of them together, or perhaps at most embroiders their button-holes” (MacDonald “Fantastic”). While fancy still clearly plays second fiddle to the imagination, it now at least has a definite role in the orchestra. We have already seen this instrument/agent metaphor in Shelley.

On the other hand, though MacDonald seems to agree in principle with Coleridge’s conception of primary and secondary imagination, he sees a much greater gap between the two than Coleridge, who sees them as “differing only in degree” (BL I.304). Paraphrasing Coleridge, MacDonald defines the imagination as “that faculty in man which is likest to the prime operation of the power of God, and has, therefore, been called the creative faculty, and its exercise creation.” But, he cautions, “we must not forget . . . that between creator and poet lies the one unpassable gulf which distinguishes—far be it from us to say divides—all that is God's from all that is man’s” (MacDonald “Imagination”). For MacDonald, there is thus a qualitative difference between the sustained primary imagination that is God’s creation and the sporadic, fumbling secondary imagination that is the poetry (in its broadest sense) of man.

Though MacDonald does not address the “willing suspension of disbelief” by name, he does devote some space in “The Fantastic Imagination” to what he calls the laws of an imaginary world. “To be able to live a moment in an imagined world,” he insists, “we must see the laws of its existence obeyed. Those broken, we fall out of it. The imagination in us, whose exercise is essential to the most temporary submission to the imagination of another, immediately, with the disappearance of Law, ceases to act” (MacDonald “Fantastic”). This is essentially an early explanation of what modern fantasy and science fiction writers now call “world building,” the construction of an imagined

world according to consistent rules. Here MacDonald also makes important strides beyond Coleridge by asserting that, in effect, the willing suspension of disbelief requires not simply a single moment of decision but rather a continual engagement of the audience's own imagination. Here too we see more clearly the role that reason can play in creating a sense of the fantastic sublime. By creating a well-developed world with its own laws, languages, and lore, a writer will effectively and inexorably draw the reader into this world. It cannot be overstated enough, though, that although this mechanical reason and worldbuilding might be a *necessary* condition for strong works of fantasy, it is not a *sufficient* one. Like the shoulders of giants, these are just building blocks upon which the author can stand to reach the fantastic sublime. But the imagination must reach both higher and deeper.

Finally, MacDonald makes a subtle but important shift in terms of the intended audience for his fantastic fiction. By the Victorian era, fairy tales and other works of fantasy were perceived as intended exclusively for children. Indeed, though Coleridge and other Romantics wrote fantasies for an adult audience, his letter to Thomas Poole of 1797 seems to suggest that this was the case even in his day. But MacDonald makes it clear that his writing, even his fairy tales, are not intended solely for children. "For my part," he quips, "I do not write for children, but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five" (MacDonald "Fantastic"). He does not elaborate further, but it is plain that he sees a value in fairy tales for grown-ups, as well as for boys and girls, especially when read in the context of his remarks about the supremacy of imagination over science mentioned above.

Overall, George MacDonald's writings on the imagination show a significant development and enrichment of Coleridge's initial observations. MacDonald both expands on Coleridge's theories in a philosophical sense, and also expresses how they might translate into the practical business of fantasy-writing. (To be fair, Coleridge might well have done this too, in the aforementioned lost preface to "*Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.") But MacDonald's writings, both theoretical and fictional, are valuable for another reason. They illustrate that Coleridge's theories on the imagination and their application in imaginative writing are resilient and resistant to the pressures of a competing dominant ideology. For Coleridge set down his theories at a time when similar ideas were flourishing both in prose like Shelley's "*A Defense of Poetry"* and verse like Lord Byron's *Manfred*. But MacDonald's Victorian England was far less fertile ground, and MacDonald's ability to make these ideas take root is all the more remarkable. And in the following century they would burst into bloom, especially in the works of J. R. R. Tolkien.

The nineteenth century marks the first time, in my view, that poets and novelists began to write with something like the framework of the fantastic sublime in mind. Flashes and even sustained bursts of the fantastic sublime can be found in world literature from *Gilgamesh* to Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. In fact, these works initially led my me in the direction of medieval literature, with its wondrous figures, colorful and sometimes mystifying language, and a strong undercurrent of morality. But the *scops*, bards, and troubadours who composed these masterpieces had other aims in mind, and while they may have hit on one or more components of the fantastic sublime, they weren't doing so in a systematic way. Later authors like Shakespeare, Spenser, and Pope

may have begun to formulate some of these ideas, but it isn't until Coleridge and MacDonald, who neatly bookend the nineteenth century, that we find authors who both preach what they practice and practice what they preach.

And so we come again, as so many discussions of fantasy inevitably do, to J. R. R. Tolkien. As a writer of fantasy, Tolkien hardly needs an introduction. Even before the success of the film adaptations of his work transformed him into a household name, he had won first the hearts of children with *The Hobbit* in 1937 and, some twenty years later, the hearts and minds of adult readers with *The Lord of the Rings*. But, like Coleridge and MacDonald before him, Tolkien thought deeply about his craft as a writer and creator, and it largely by virtue of this thought that his art has achieved such timeless success. His 1939 lecture "On Fairy-Stories," subsequently published as an essay in the 1964 book *Tree and Leaf*, is, as the editors of the recent authoritative edition of the essay put it, "Tolkien's defining study of and the centre-point in his thinking about the genre [of fantasy], as well as being the theoretical basis for his fiction" (Flinger and Anderson 9). In this seminal work, he addresses all the points about the imagination raised by Coleridge and, following MacDonald, defends their application in the literary arts. We have already explored the other facets of Tolkien's theory of fantasy as it contributes to the fantastic sublime, but I have saved his thoughts on the imagination for last, because I feel they serve as a linchpin for the fantastic sublime as a whole.

At first glance it would appear that Tolkien dispenses altogether with Coleridge's whole tripartite scheme of primary imagination, secondary imagination, and fancy. Indeed, he takes issue with the desynonymization of imagination and fancy, though he does not single out Coleridge directly. A philologist of the highest order and sometime

editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, Tolkien may be displaying false modesty when he ventures that, "[r]idiculous though it may be for one so ill-instructed to have an opinion on this critical matter, I venture to think the verbal distinction philologically inappropriate, and the analysis inaccurate" (OFS 59). Having deconstructed Coleridge's framework, Tolkien then counters with his own, which is, by his own admission, just as arbitrary as Coleridge's imagination/fancy divide.

> The mental power of image-making is one thing, or aspect; and it should appropriately be called Imagination. . . The achievement of the expression, which gives (or seems to give) the inner consistency of reality, is indeed another thing, or aspect, needing another name: Art, the operative link between Imagination and the final result, Sub-creation. For my present purpose I require a word which shall embrace both the Sub-creative Art in itself and a quality of strangeness and wonder in the Expression. . . I propose, therefore, to arrogate to myself the powers of Humpty-Dumpty, and to use Fantasy for this purpose. (OFS 59-60)

But the advantage to this approach as both a theoretical model and a critical framework is that it separates out and clearly labels the writer's mind (Imagination), the creative process itself (Art), and the finished product (Sub-creation). Fantasy is the end result.

Although Tolkien's theory dispenses with Coleridge's distinction between imagination and fancy, however, it preserves and even strengthens Coleridge's assertions regarding the qualitative similarities between primary and secondary imagination. This isn't immediately obvious, though the term "Sub-creation" gives us a telling hint. But to fully understand Tolkien's debt to Coleridge, we must travel back to 1931, eight years before Tolkien delivered his lecture "On Fairy-Stories." In that year, following a late-night conversation with his friend C. S. Lewis in which he defended the truths of Pagan myth even in a Christian world, he crystalized his thoughts into a poem called "Mythopoeia." He quotes several lines from the poem in his lecture, and they are worth

quoting here as well, for they cut to the heart of the similarity between primary and secondary imagination:

> Man, Sub-creator, the refracted light
> through whom is splintered from a single White
> to many hues, and endlessly combined
> in living shapes that move from mind to mind.
> Though all the crannies of the world we filled
> with Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build
> Gods and their houses out of dark and light,
> and sowed the seed of dragons, 'twas our right. (Mythopoeia 61-8)

The metaphor of light that Tolkien employs here and elsewhere for the imaginative process is more vivid than Coleridge's original distinction, but it nonetheless conveys exactly the same sense. In fact, the verbs Coleridge uses to describe the process of the secondary imagination—dissolves, diffuses, dissipates—suggest he was thinking along the same metaphorical lines. But Tolkien, usually so careful to avoid overt religious reference, here actually makes the religious and spiritual implications of the imagination more explicit than Coleridge's "infinite I AM." While, as we saw, George MacDonald is uncomfortable with ascribing to man the power of creation, Tolkien actually revels in man's creative power. As in Coleridge, man's creative power differs from that of God only in degree, hence the word "sub-creator."

Tolkien's vision of man as sub-creator leads him to openly challenge Coleridge's willing suspension of disbelief. Like MacDonald, he argues that a secondary world, or sub-creation, must be governed by a certain consistency if it is to hold an audience's attention. To him, "this suspension of disbelief is a substitute for the genuine thing, a subterfuge we use when condescending to games or make-believe, or when trying (more or less willingly) to find what virtue we can in the work of an art that has for us failed" (OFS 52). The true aim of fantasy, for Tolkien, is to draw the audience into a state of

"Secondary Belief" similar to the sustained participative imagination argued for by MacDonald. The real change from Coleridge, and even MacDonald, here is that it places the burden of proof, so to speak, on the artist rather than the audience. When confronted with a good work of fantasy, the audience should not have to voluntarily suspend disbelief. Rather, "the story-maker proves a successful 'subcreator'. He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside" (OFS 52). I can't help but think that Coleridge would have admired the symmetry of this idea of primary and secondary belief with his own idea of primary and secondary imagination, and would have conceded the point to Tolkien.

And it is here that the fantastic sublime comes into full flower. Tolkien's language here reflects many of the writings on the sublime, from Longinus all the way up to present critics like Robert Doran. There is a certain inexorable, inevitable, magnetic pull that surrounds works of the sublime like a gravitational field. The sublime grabs hold of readers and doesn't let them go. It turns their gaze upward and pushes their minds and spirits to see and experience things they could not have otherwise imagined. And at the same time, it makes audiences see themselves from those same heights, see their own mortality and frailty, and want to climb higher, be greater, do better. But while traditional conceptions of the sublime see this process as occurring in flashes, as lightning during a tumultuous storm, Tolkien insists we can have more than that. In his view, we can actually live in a world, if only for a little while, where the sublime is made manifest, where it is as real as rain.

And like Coleridge and MacDonald before him, he insists that these sublime worlds are not merely the playgrounds of children, but the kingdoms of all readers, of any age. He is in agreement with Coleridge about the educational value of fairy-stories. While tepidly approving of fairy tales written specifically for children, he urges that "it may be better for them to read some things, especially fairy-stories, that are beyond their measure rather than short of it. Their books like their clothes should allow for growth, and their books at any rate should encourage it." But Tolkien is adamant that fantasy or fairy stories (he uses the terms more or less interchangeably) should be read by everyone. "If fairy-story as a kind is worth reading at all it is worthy to be written for and read by adults," he says, for "they will, of course, put more in and get more out than children can." (OFS 58).

Tolkien delivered this lecture about two years after publishing *The Hobbit*, and just as he was beginning to work in earnest on *The Lord of the Rings*. While the former book is clearly a book for children, the latter effort "grew in the telling," as he notes in the foreword to the second edition. Fortunately for the reading world, he practiced what he preached in "On Fairy-Stories." But he did not build this world on sand. Tolkien scholars point to the medieval sources for Tolkien's world, and rightly so, for these are indeed his secondary world's bones and sinews. But its life-blood is, I would argue, the imaginative laws, inaugurated by Coleridge and expanded by MacDonald,[3] that both create and sustain it. He took his own advice to heart and created a secondary world, Middle Earth, that has captivated and captured the imagination of millions of readers,

[3] Unfortunately there isn't space here to trace Tolkien's reading of these two authors. But for now it is enough that established Tolkien scholars Verlyn Flinger and Douglas A. Anderson cite both authors as influences in their authoritative edition of On Fairy-Stories" and I have found no cause in my own research to dispute their claim.

drawing them into a state of secondary belief that, in some cases, lasts long past the reading of the books.

Chapter 5

Putting it all together—the fantastic sublime

I have now, I hope, laid the foundation for the concept of the fantastic sublime based on the critical works of Longinus and Tolkien. But as is perhaps already obvious, the fantastic sublime is greater than the sum of its parts, and so I should just like to say a few final brief words about the idea as a whole before moving on to its application in literary criticism. Most important, though Longinus's *Peri hypsous* and Tolkien's "On Fairy-Stories" constitute the twin pillars of the fantastic sublime, their contribution to the fantastic sublime should not be seen as complete or definitive. The fantastic sublime in literature, like language which is its ultimate foundation, is a living, breathing, perhaps even growing force. So, naturally rhetorical devices and figures other than those catalogued by Longinus will inevitably be enlisted into its service. And it may be that fantasy literature fulfills other primordial desires beyond those enumerated by Tolkien. And, as I said, *eucatastrophe* has a much more universal application than Tolkien's Christian framework would suggest. Thus as a critical framework I hope the fantastic sublime will prove both durable enough to stand up to scrutiny, yet flexible enough to allow for change and growth.

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